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THE SOVIET UNION THE WARSAW PACT AND THE THIRD WORLD  
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NATO STUDIES R W CLAWSON 31 MAR 84 N00124-83-RC-02893

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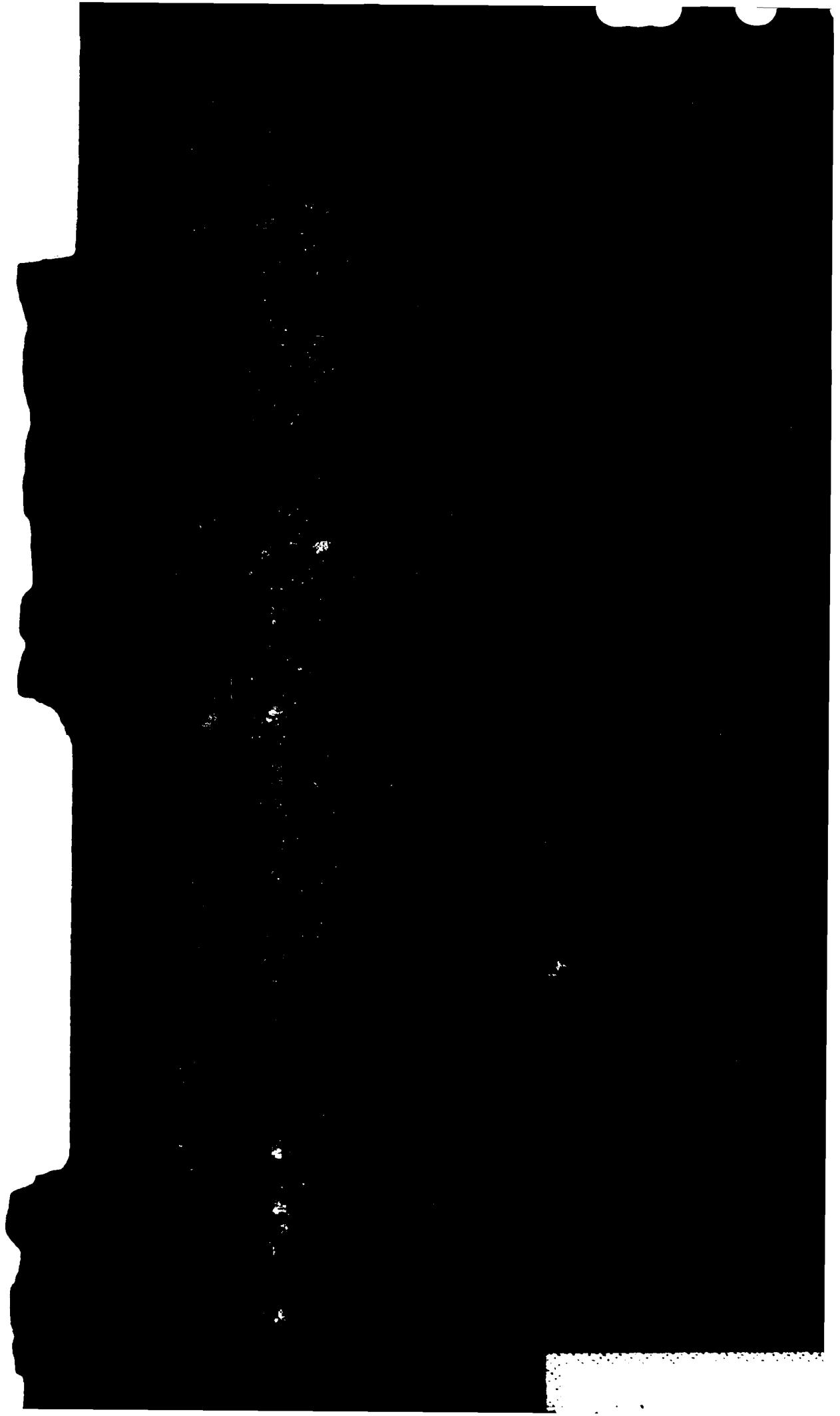
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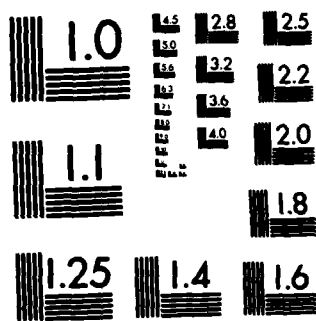
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Robert W. Clawson

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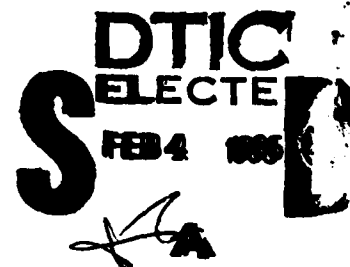
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## EARLY SOVIET MEANS TO PROJECT POWER: 1917-1953

The development of Soviet efforts in the dependent, colonial and emerging Third World was historically characterized by a number of important weaknesses and cautions. Though far from a comprehensive list, these would include: (1) inadequate means to project significant assistance, in whatever form, much beyond Soviet border areas; the greater the distances, the more profound the difficulties, (2) relatively modest knowledge of local political, military or economic conditions, languages and other crucial information about the target areas, (3) distrust of local agents and groups as well as reluctance or at least indecision about getting too deeply involved with local non-Soviet style emerging leaderships, (4) persisting lack of qualified personnel, money and equipment resources to support significant aid and grant programs, (5) continuing caution about interfering in colonial, dependent, or regional areas thought to be considered critical by western nations, and finally (6) less than all-consuming ideological motivations tempered by a usually firm and cautious realpolitik, further affected by constantly shifting policy assumptions.

## KHRUSHCHEV: EXPANDING MEANS

The Soviets slowly remedied many of these weaknesses in their ability to project power over great distances but in no particularly high priority manner. Their upgraded capabilities seem to have emerged mainly as spin-off from homeland defense programs and domestic economic development. As their means improved they expanded their

contacts, relying on modest tightly focused economic aid and rather more impressive military assistance.

Despite the breathtaking character of a number of Khrushchev's adventuristic schemes, for the most part his activity in the Third World was cautious and carefully formulated. Truly Soviet-initiated military intervention and direct proxy operations in Third World combat were to come later and on a very selective basis.

#### BREZHNEV: MATURING MEANS

Among the most important foreign policy goals for the Soviets in the post-Khrushchev world was surely to achieve their version of parity in strategic weapons. A similarly high priority drove them to create a massive and modernized theater force facing NATO and to fashion a convincing defense against China.

As these homeland defense programs matured, the USSR's ability to supply conventional ground forces' equipment and modest military assistance training began to grow. Those efforts were supplemented by an expanded ability to project first naval and then air and airborne ground forces at significant distances from the USSR.

As national defense capabilities became more credible, not least to the Soviets themselves, they seem slowly and cautiously to have become convinced that they could extend their global influence and exploit worldwide trends with much less risk to the homeland than had been true earlier. This new protection extended even to allies such as Cuba.

As the USSR carried out its projects in the late 1960's and 1970's, especially in Asia and in Africa, the Soviets anticipated some reaction from the Western allies. But while one or more might have been tempted to use military force to try to turn back the clock as the U.S. had done in Cuba and did in Vietnam, the Soviet armed forces had grown enormously in strength and capability and the West's military alternatives were steadily reduced. For the same reason, the USSR and its allies needed no longer to be so cautious about employing the military instrument directly in aid of their Third World interests in most areas of the world.

The U.S. finally reacted in the late 1970's and early 1980's (remembering the misery of ground combat in Vietnam) by opting for less painful programs of rebuilding really threatening strategic nuclear capabilities and serious conventional forces so as to reverse Soviet assumptions that there were stalemates in Europe and at the nuclear margin and to warn the USSR that American power could still be projected. A thoroughly confused U.S. China policy at least hinted at another allied option. Naturally, seeing the general direction of American thinking, the USSR is committed to maintain, at a minimum, a modest strategic advantage and clear conventional European superiority against the U.S. and NATO. This is probably a contest that the U.S., even if it had NATO's enthusiastic and consistent support, cannot win in the sense of regaining the leverage once offered by the doctrine of "massive retaliation" backed up by a more convincing conventional capability in Europe. The Soviets



surely have the will and the resources to maintain those stalemates.

#### EXPLOITING THE "GLOBALISM" SCHISM IN NATO

Against this background the European members of NATO are more willing to look for accommodations with the Soviets. One principal reason is not difficult to fathom; the U.S. is the only "global" actor in NATO, no matter what ambitions may still reside in the capitals of Europe, or what empire legacies cling to them for solutions. For many Europeans, détente in Europe is détente. Much of Europe still does not regard the expansion of Soviet influence in the Third World as an important threat to its vital interests. And for the Soviets, Europe is one of the two key strategic borders they have to stabilize as permanently as possible. So both many Western Europeans and the Soviets must inevitably think of European détente as being to their mutual advantage.

The U.S. cannot see détente in similar terms because it has long felt that it alone faced the "global" part of Soviet foreign policy. For more than twenty-five years the vanguard of that Soviet activity has consisted of Soviet efforts to convert carefully selected Third World countries to client-states and to encourage them to adopt Soviet-style centralized governments: the modern Third World version of "communist expansionism". The U.S. somewhat reluctantly feels it still cannot tolerate that; clearly many Europeans assume that they can. Besides, many Americans have concluded, Europe knows very well that the U.S. is always there, if things get too far out of control. This contentious

situation has been one of the several major critical issues persistently threatening NATO cohesion and solidarity. And despite the increased agreement among the allies that "out of area" problems should be addressed in concert, no adequate framework appears likely to be adopted for doing so.

But the Soviet Union has failed to exploit this schism or any of the other major interallied disagreements; the U.S., despite the best efforts of a number of prominent Europeans, is still there both with its nuclear threat and its conventional commitment. Hence through the 1980's the Soviets will surely continue to attempt to make the best deals possible with Europe, and they will certainly applaud when the U.S. tries to force Europe into uncomfortable undertakings "out of area" or takes unilateral action there without even the most minimal consultation with the allies. From the Soviet standpoint the more of that sort of U.S. sponsored "globalism" there is, the more likely it seems that many Europeans will be tempted to negotiate separate accommodations with the USSR: the U.S. might then be invited to depart by its NATO allies. If the Soviets could refrain from precipitous and ill-conceived action in Europe they could probably maximize their pressure on the NATO alliance, though some have speculated about a possible Soviet reluctance to see the "stabilizing" influence of the United States removed from Europe.

#### SOVIET SHORT TERM OBJECTIVES IN THE THIRD WORLD

In the first years of Soviet power the Bolsheviks tried to break the weak links described by Lenin as the most vulnerable parts of imperial capitalism through local revolution. It would have to be

ignited as much by example as by direct aid. These efforts, always modest at best, were sometimes pursued with the short-term aim of weakening metropolitan colonial powers, sometimes abandoned when the European reaction seemed too dangerous. Stalin's various problems including his own peculiar set of international blinders prevented him from consistently carrying out even the most modest policies in the colonial and dependent world.

Khrushchev's relatively short but spectacular tenure was a real watershed. He may truly have seen the Soviet model as appropriate for the emerging Third World but the concessions he made to the realities of global politics took the Soviets a long way away from revolutionary Leninism, at least in the short and medium term. They decided to support not only revolutionary "national liberation" groups but also a broad spectrum of nationalists from the virulently to the modestly anti-American and from peasant leaders to kings. The USSR's pre-war European pragmatism was slowly revived for use in the newly emerging Third World.

The Brezhnev leadership refined this pragmatism by a combination of steadily growing military and economic means and an increasingly better informed assessment of the ratio of cost to benefit. If the flashy adventurism and sheer luck of the Khrushchev days were missing, the payoff in the Brezhnev group's terms must have seemed on the whole both greater and more predictable, not to say safer. This particular approach combined both the exploitation of targets of opportunity and the planned development of specific programs and

campaigns. The results of course have been mixed. For example they seem to have won in Angola by grasping the opportunity but in Zimbabwe they appear to have developed the wrong man.

At any rate, the short to medium term objective has been to increase the influence of the Soviet state qua state. The primary means have consisted of relatively modest economic aid and trade and a very substantial range of security assistance programs up to and even including battlefield participation.

Somewhat longer term objectives seem to incorporate the expectation that these Third World nations will begin to adopt something at least vaguely resembling Soviet style political systems. But the model they have in mind is more like that of the USSR today, not the revolutionary model of Lenin.

#### SOVIET LONG TERM GOALS IN THE THIRD WORLD

Whenever Soviet opportunism or programmatic payoff has allowed them to establish themselves even for brief periods of time in Third World nations, many Western (and Soviet) observers have seen those successes, even if fleeting, as examples of the unfolding of master plans either for Russian conquest or Soviet communization of the globe. These plans usually seem to be most often conceptualized as composed of interwoven strategic initiatives such as encircling China, creeping toward the Persian Gulf, knocking over domino nations, or absorbing borderlands. Much of this kind of argument has sound historical bases and can be inferred from observable behavior. Soviet and bloc defectors produce their versions of

smuggled master plans for world domination. But much of this picture also rests on faith. And a kind of devil theory plays a strong role in much of that faith: the evil empire forges ahead irresistably.

Many have argued more specifically that the USSR is in reality conducting a resource war. Nixon writes that Said Barre was told so by Brezhnev. The whole resource scenario seems to have gripped the imagination of many analysts in the West. But although a West cut off from its resources would surely be a Soviet dream come true, the realities of world politics surely temper Soviet expectations and policy, as will be argued in detail in a subsequent essay.

Perhaps it is, as others have held, that no Soviet leadership will ever sleep well until the whole world is made up of Soviet style systems dependent on the USSR. If that thesis is valid, the Third World of today is the only place they can really make any evident headway. But the immediate results, wildly idiosyncratic Third World socialist regimes with all of their seemingly inevitable instabilities, must be disappointing to them. Having a few of them adopt actively anti-Western foreign policies must now seem somewhat less than permanent.

#### SOVIET IMPERIALISM

A potentially more useful image of Soviet policy in the Third World has been emerging in Western literature based on much the same data but using a somewhat different set of assumptions. This is the

concept of modern Soviet imperialism as a general set of policies supporting the elites' presumption that the USSR should, indeed must (sacred mission), become the preeminent and largely unchallengable global influence in the Third World.

If the devil theory and evil empire can be set aside in favor of the concept of modern Soviet international imperialism, are there models of past imperialism that may help to characterize Soviet behavior in a useful manner. Some recent analyses have drawn highly suggestive parallels with the ancient empires, particularly Byzantium. Are there other more modern examples that might bare consideration?

Are they, somewhat like the British of the 18th and 19th centuries, out to control the commerce and wealth of the world? Are they after agricultural produce, minerals, cheap labor and a system of dependency that will enrich their own economy? It is indeed possible that in some certain specific cases they may have their eyes on minerals that are being exhausted at home. And they do often strike sharpish commercial deals overseas. However, the very high cost and negligible economic payoffs of Soviet security assistance and even economic aid and trade programs make the British imperial model an unlikely candidate to provide much analytic insight into long-term goals. Besides the USSR is really successful mainly in the very poorest nations of the world.

Without investing too much in the analogy, the German imperial model of colonial expansion may provide one of the most promising historical parallels. Wilhelm's Germans engaged in colonial expansion mainly for a number of non-economic reasons, several of which seem

suggestive. They wanted to prove that Germany was a truly great world power by doing what great world powers did. More practically, they wanted to redress what they felt was an unfair balance against them in terms of global presence and influence. And of course they wanted to chip away at the strength of the principal world power of that era, Great Britain.

This sense of the need to play a truly global role is not really very difficult to discern in even the most obfuscatingly ideological Soviet writing on their role in international affairs. Of course it can perhaps be most easily illustrated today in the work of people like Admirals Gorshkov and Stalbo as well as other naval authors; they are naturally enough among the principal defense establishment authors who deal with themes of long-range power projection, but the other services are beginning to be heard from in much the same tones.

#### THE EAST EUROPEANS

What of the non-Soviet Warsaw Pact nations' role in this global destiny? First, it is compulsory to note that as of now, the Pact as an international organization really has no formal role to play in Third World. But that kind of disclaimer always seems to project either an extraordinary naïveté or an unforgiveable sophistry. In fact the East Europeans are committed to assist the USSR in the Third World through the unexceptional device of bilateral agreements between them and the Soviet Union. These have involved them in economic, military and security police assistance around the world.

In the 1950's it was the Czechs who supplied their high grade weapons and other equipment when Soviet ordinance and vehicles were not considered reliable enough or of sufficiently high quality, or when the USSR did not want to be too precisely identified with the international arms trade. Since the early 1960's the Soviets themselves have become the principals in the Third World and the East Europeans have been assigned auxiliary or specialty roles. In military assistance training, for instance, the Bulgarians send small missions where the Soviets evidently feel they must maintain low exposure; the GDR sends its famous internal security police specialists to train client forces.

In sum, while obviously reluctant to allow the Warsaw Pact itself to enlarge its geographic limits, the East European members have agreed individually to assist the Soviet Union in what it sees as its "sacred" global mission to liberate the Third World. They perform special tasks in support of the USSR in its growing responsibility as a great power to take advantage of opportunities to enlarge its influence. This assistance may not be entirely unattractive to the East European governments. There may be some feeling among those states that their various roles provide valuable circumstances to expand their own worldwide contacts. They may well see these opportunities as, in modest degree, enhancing their own national sovereignty.



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